Mr. Speaker, is this really the time for the United States to lead an attack on Iraq

and to make this the immediate centerpiece of our war on terrorism? I think not.

This is not to suggest that military action and war are never justified.

Clearly, there are times when force is not only justified but is the most effective means of securing human rights,

freedom and security. Knowing when to

go to war is as important, however, as recognizing when a war is justified.

Liberating the people of Iraq from

one of the world’s most repressive regimes and preventing Saddam Hussein

from acquiring nuclear weapons and

other weapons of mass destruction are

all worthy goals that are beyond reasonable argument. But are we certain

that we have reached the point where

war is the only means of achieving these goals?

A few weeks ago I joined Senator MCCAIN and other legislators at the

Wehrkunde Conference. During the

conference, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld confronted the Europeans, challenging them to join in military action

to disarm Saddam. Most Europeans balked, and they continue to balk today. We may not be entirely alone,

but we remain largely isolated, and that will not only make success in Iraq

harder. It will also risk our long-term success in the war against al Qaeda and terrorism.

The administration speaks of a short war and assured success. But success in

Iraq is not just about eliminating Saddam. Many military experts believe

that that will be the easy part. Success

in Iraq also means managing the ensuing social chaos, keeping a lid on the

Middle East powder keg, thwarting terrorist attacks at home, rebuilding Iraq,

and doing all of this when our own economy is faltering. Energy prices are

rising and domestic priorities like health care and education are crying out for attention.

The President should be commended for deciding to act through the United

Nations with respect to Iraq. And Secretary of State Powell performed admirably in achieving the unanimous Se-

curity Council vote giving Iraq a last

chance to disarm and instituting renewed inspections. Those were steps

that earned us the support of the world

community. But that support has dwindled as the administration presses

for early action on a timetable that seems to be largely driven by the rising

temperatures in the Iraqi desert rather than the degree to which we have built

international support. In fact, this has gone so far that some members of the

Security Council seem prepared to repudiate the resolution they so recently approved.

The President’s rhetoric has fueled the perception that America is eager

for invasion, no matter what the rest

of the world thinks. This perception has been compounded by seemingly

shifting goals and rationales. President Bush did finally specify disarmament

as opposed to regime change as the official goal of any U.S. invasion of Iraq.

But the administration’s emphasis has

changed as it suited the President’s

case. It has been weapons of mass destruction one day, potential links to al

Qaeda the next, and Saddam’s atrocious human rights record the day after that.

The point is not that these rationales are unfounded. Saddam is a ruthless

tyrant who has attacked his neighbors

and terrorized and murdered his own people. He has defied U.N. resolutions

and has given every sign of trying to continue to evade disarmament.

The point is that it is difficult to believe the administration did not opt for

war long ago whatever the consequences. Although we could be left

virtually alone to bear the costs of winning the war and securing the

peace, the administration has appeared intent on moving forward, seemingly

with contempt for international opinion.

Although it seems that we are beyond the 11th hour and the clock is

ticking, there are things we can and must do before taking military action

against Iraq. I think continued diplomatic pressure and the threat of military action can force Saddam Hussein

to disarm or seek permanent exile abroad. We should continue to apply this pressure through the United Nations.

Further, I think we must be more open to the idea of so-called coercive

inspections, using our military buildup in coordination with the U.N. to test

the effectiveness of a more robust inspection and disarmament process in

Iraq. This would involve putting the

most qualified people in the field, providing them with real-time intelligence, destroying forbidden items as

soon as they are detected, strictly prohibiting Iraqi flying in the designated

no-fly zones and reinforcing the authority of inspectors with ground troops if necessary.

Mr. Speaker, I am an optimist by nature, but I am not naive. Coercive inspections alone may not be enough to

disarm Saddam. But I believe they may be the best step now to build greater

international support for forcing him to disarm. And as a strategic move in our larger role against terrorism,

tightening the international noose on Saddam strikes me as a smarter option, at least in the short term, than

opting now for a war with all its known and unknown consequences.